

Decolonising the Medieval: a comparative study of medieval modules at a *first-year* university level

Introduction

The study of Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages is both fascinating and, for many first-year history students, largely unfamiliar territory. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the term "medieval" refers to a period or subject "related to the Middle Ages." At Durham University, one first-year module currently explores the medieval Mediterranean, with a focus on transitional dynamics in the region. However, the medieval period encompasses a broader historical scope that extends beyond Europe and the Roman Empire. This project aims to examine how the History Department at Durham University might further revise its curriculum to decolonise the medieval content offered at the introductory level.

This poster will explore the following contents to examine how could the department decolonise the current syllabus:

- Comparison with other UK universities
- Late Antique and the Medieval period in a global perspective (scholarships-wise)

Key Question: The 'Whitest' Subject in the Room

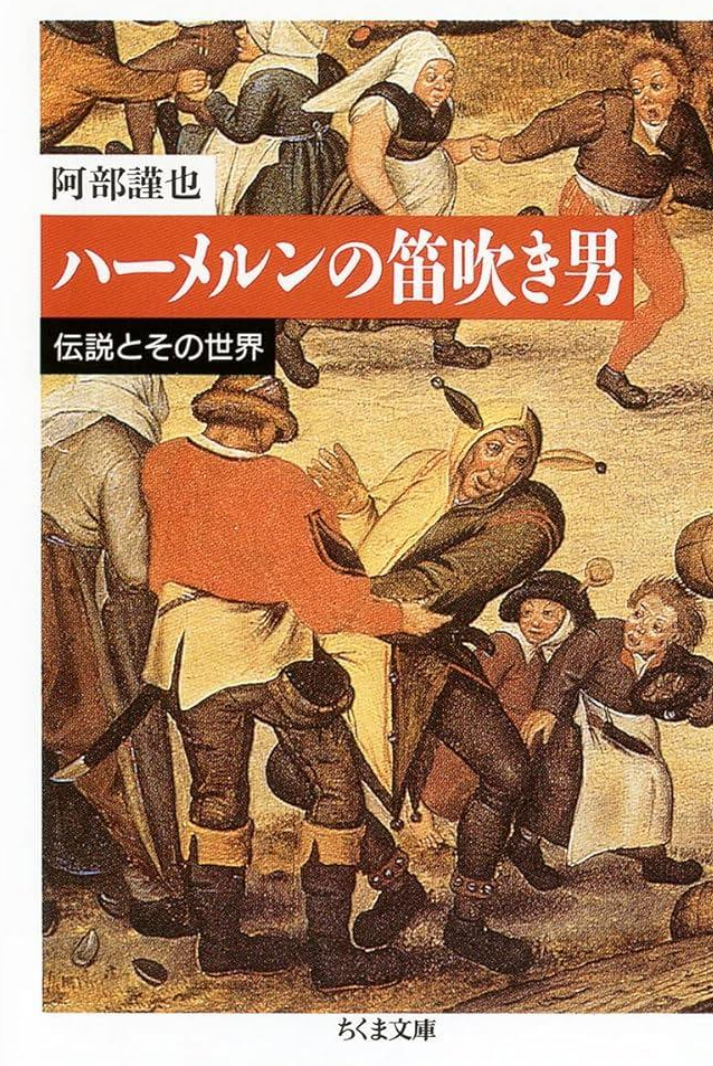
As Dominic Griffith highlights in his discussion of philosophy pedagogy in South African universities—where curricula have historically been heavily Westernised—the current medieval curriculum at Durham faces a similar challenge, lacking diverse sources and methodologies. By incorporating a broader array of sources, methodological approaches, and learning opportunities beyond the classroom, Durham’s medieval courses could become more inclusive and effective.

I. Choice of Topic

At universities offering more than one medieval module, the Medieval British Isles is typically the second or third option. This structure supports continuity for students who choose to pursue further modules in British history in later years of study.



[1]



[2]



[3]

O1 - Ancient and Medieval States and Societies over the First Millennium

O3 - Medieval Europe c. 1100 - 1450

[4]

HIST1310	The Medieval World in Ten Objects
HIST1320	Medieval Lives: Identities, Cultures and Beliefs

[5]

Research Sources

Data and image collected in May 2025 by me, credit from the following websites:
The Complete University Guide

Image 1: Statue of Constantine the Great, York from Wikipedia

Image 2: cover of ハーメルンの笛吹き男—伝説とその世界 by Abe Kinuya

Image 3: Ae Follis - Constantine Ist The Great (329 to 330) - Alexandria from *Ancient Roman Coins*

Image 4: papers of Cambridge Uniiversity History Department, 2024/2025

Image 5: University of Leeds, History Optional Modules, 2024/25

II. Methodologies

The period of Late Antiquity is often divided according to the reigns of Roman emperors. However, it is important for students to move beyond a "Great Man" approach and also consider the lives of ordinary individuals and marginalized groups.

III. Scholarships

Scholars around the world continue to produce research on the medieval period. For example, in Japan, institutions such as Sophia University and Waseda University host centres for Medieval Studies. International scholarship contributes to a broader understanding of European cultures and helps students engage with the period from diverse perspectives.

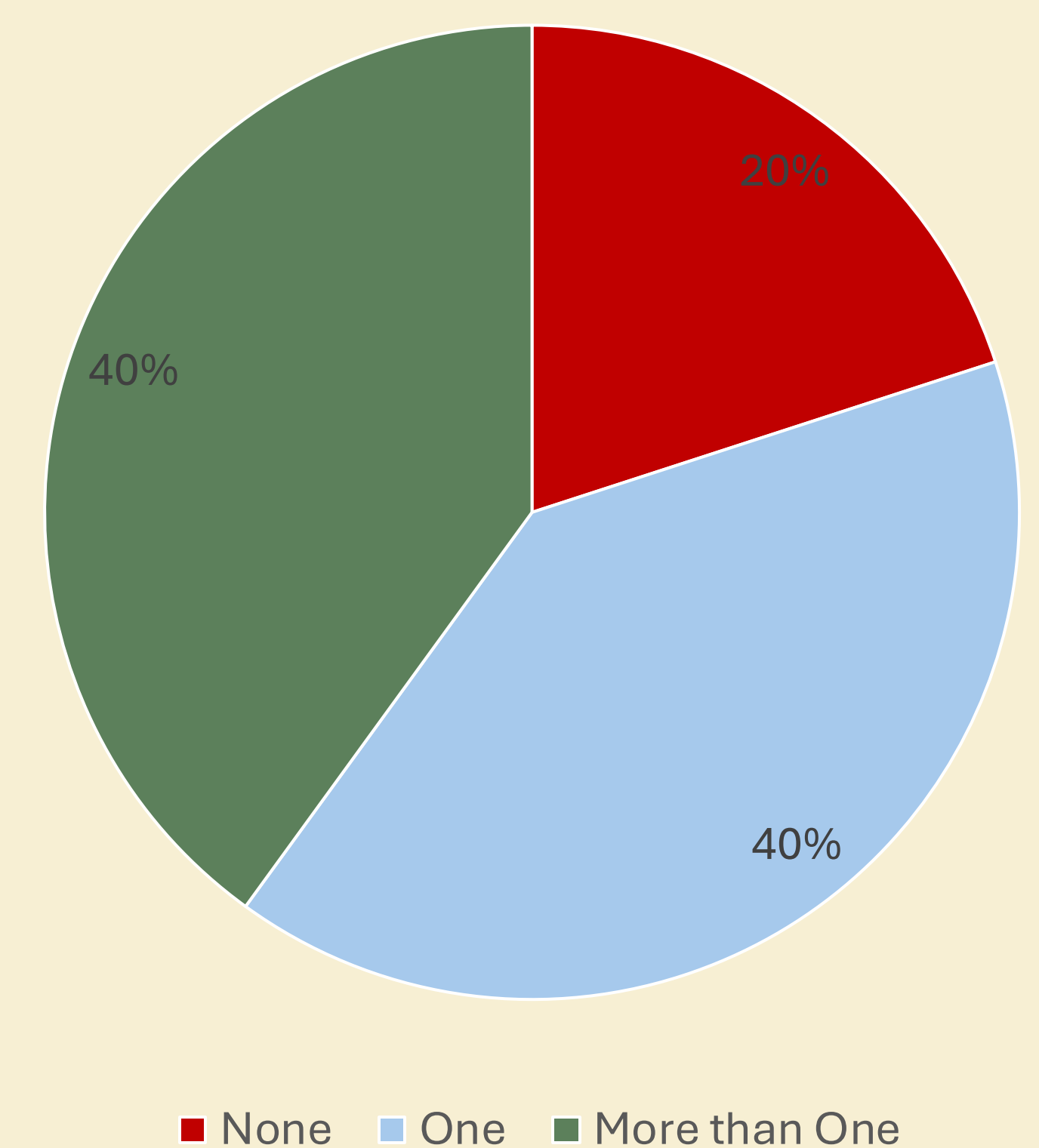
IV. Artefacts

The lives of common people have been largely underrepresented in Late Antique studies, as surviving artifacts primarily served to reinforce imperial authority rather than depict everyday life. While imperial ceremonies and performances were central to those living in the Roman Empire, focusing on the experiences of ordinary individuals is crucial for understanding their daily routines.

V. Comparison with Other UK Universities

The chart on the right shows how the top 20 UK universities for history include medieval modules in their first-year curriculum. Eighty percent incorporate medieval history into the introductory syllabus, while the remaining 20%—four institutions—do not offer medieval content at this level. Among those that do, there is an even split between universities offering a single module and those offering multiple.

Among 20 UK Universities



Conclusion

- Diversity in topics
 - Solely focusing on transitions in late antique is marginalising history of the barbarian kingdoms including own history of England
 - Certain connections that is beyond the Mediterranean
- Diverse use of sources
 - the use of language- adding a word catalogue at the beginning of each lecture helping students to better understand key concepts
 - Scholarships- possible scholarships from non-English speaking researchers written in or translated to English

Reference Article:

Andrea R English, Ruth Heilbronn, Decolonizing the curriculum: philosophical perspectives—an introduction, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Volume 58, Issue 2-3, April-June 2024, Pages 155–165, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopedu/qhac043>

Other Documents:

Durham Undergraduate Handbook 2024/2025

Pie chart credit on me